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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the quantity and quality of English used orally by 6-year-old Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservation Indian children. Interviews, conducted by American Indian teacher aides following a standardized interview guide, were recorded on cassette tapes. Random samples of the tapes were transcribed and analyzed for total utterances, types of utterances, responses to American Indian stimuli versus general-interest stimuli, and deviations from standard English. Findings were interpreted as indicating that the children lacked linguistic readiness for first-grade reading programs. Implications for instructional programs are considered. (Author/AA)

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ARE FIRST GRADE INDIAN CHILDREN READY TO READ

by

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ARE FIRST GRADE INDIAN CHILDREN READY TO READ?

Indian children are potentially able students who, in terms of readiness for school expectations, may be the most disadvantaged of all cultural groups. Few Indian children experience reading success, but given educational environments adapted to their needs, they should have success expectencies equal to those of more educationally advantaged groups.

Cultural differences are known to create handicaps, however, it seems probable that the lack of facility with the language used in schools may create the Indian child's greatest barrier to reading success. It is known that ability to use and understand a language must preceed reading it. Since observations suggest that Indian children do not use the school English that they are expected to read, a study was conducted to examine the quantity and quality of oral English used by six-year-old Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservation Indians in Montana (Simpson, 1975).

The objectives of the study were: (1) to identify deviations from standard English usage, (2) to measure fluency of oral speech in terms of numbers of words, communication units, and mazes, and (3) to determine whether Indian children would respond more fluently to stimulus pictures with specific Indian interest.

Criteria for sampling procedures were designed to minimize effects

of off-reservation language-models and to control the influence of standard English instruction. First, nearly one hundred percent Indian enrollment was required for participating schools. Second, subjects had to be six years old by October 31, be enrolled in a first-grade, have had kindergarten or Head Start experience, and be living on the reservation.

All children meeting the criteria were interviewed by Indians using a standard interview guide. The Indians were teacher aides with whom the children were familiar and interviews simulated familiar one-to-one reading instruction environments. Each child was asked specific questions about six stimulus pictures, three of which had been selected for Indian interest. Interviews were recorded on cassette tapes. Twenty-five tapes from each tribal group were randomly selected to be transcribed into typewritten form and become the basis for data analysis.

To provide for comparisons with other populations, this study replicated the first-grade level of an earlier study in Oakland, California (Loban, 1963, 1966). Stimulus pictures of general interest and guides for interviews, transcriptions, and analysis were obtained from Loban.

Quantity of speech was determined by counting the numbers of total words, communication units, mazes, and elliptical clauses in each transcript. A communication unit was defined as utterances between terminal silences which could not be separated without loss of meaning. An elliptical clause was defined as words between terminal silences which could be expanded into an independent clause by repeating words from the question. Mazes were defined as utterances which did not contribute meaning.

Quality of speech was determined by counting frequencies of specific deviations from standard English. Deviation classifications were from the Oakland study.

Analysis of variance with t test was applied to test null hypotheses of no significant difference in numbers of total words, communication units, words from Loban pictures, words from Indian pictures, and deviations from standard English. Sub-groups used for comparison were all Crow subjects, all Northern Cheyenne subjects, all boys, all girls, Crow boys, Crow girls, Northern Cheyenne boys, and Northern Cheyenne girls.

Descriptive comparisons were made between the means of this study and those of the Oakland study. Means reported by Loban (1963, 1966) for first grade children were used for comparison.

The most important findings of this study were:

1. There were no significant differences between Indian sub-groups.

2. Differences in responses to Indian interest versus general interest stimulus pictures were not significant but favored the latter.

3. Quantity of speech comparisons between Indian and Oakland children significantly favored the latter. The range of total words uttered by Indian children was 40 to 357 with all sub-group means below 150. The lowest mean total words in the Loban study was 432, 75 higher than the highest individual frequency for Indians. Loban suggested that a 432 mean signified unreadiness for reading instruction.

4. Elliptical clauses, most of which were one or two word responses, accounted for over fifty percent of the communication units in Indian speech.

The mean average number of words per communication unit for Indian children was less than 3.5, compared to 4.9 for the lowest linguistic group in the Loban study.

5. The mean number of mazes for Indian groups was 3.2 to 7.7 percent of total words uttered, compared with 7.6 to 15.6 percent for Oakland sub-groups. Loban reported that the more fluent speakers in his study used fewer mazes. Indian children who were the most fluent used more mazes.

6. Deviations from standard English suggested possible problems with the verb to be, omission of articles, and omission of subject pronouns, however, low total word counts and high elliptical clause counts probably distorted the deviation findings.

The findings from this small scale study which explored a little-known area and used research tools designed for other populations are limited. Responses elicited from only twenty-five subjects from each of two Indian tribes can not generalize to all Indians, however, the following conclusions are suggested:

1. First grade Indian children are not verbal in a controlled interview situation similar to many classroom reading environments, and there is a high frequency of one and two word responses, therefore, Indian children are not linguistically ready for first grade reading programs. They must become more proficient in usage before trying to read the English language.

2. Verbal responses of young Indian children are apparently less

affected by picture content than expected. However, stimulus pictures used in the study may have contained less cultural difference than anticipated. More research is needed in this area.

3. Omissions in syntactical structure and usage of the verb to be may be predictable characteristics in Indian English usage. Additional research is needed to learn more about differences which may exist in linguistic structure.

Previous studies support recommendations for promoting proficiency in oral English usage. Francis (1962) advocated that oral language be considered in planning first grade programs, Loban (1969) said less verbal children need many experiences with oral language before they can read or write, and Chomsky (1972) urged that children be exposed to a rich variety of language input. Labov (1967) and Hall and Turner (1971) recognized that language acquisition patterns which meet social speech-community needs of minority children often present difficulties for communication in school.

Research with American Indian populations has been limited. However, there is some evidence that Indian children function from two to three years below white children in vocabulary skills, syntactical complexity, and conceptual understanding (Simpson, 1975, pp. 61-63).

Several studies have supported hypotheses that for Black children there is a difference between ability to produce and to comprehend standard English. Labov (1967, p. 164) was referring to Black students when he said there is no reason why a person who produces a non-standard dialect can not learn to read standard English.

There is a need for further linguistic studies with Indian children. Suggestions for future research are:

1. to replicate the present study using different subjects, interviewers, stimulus pictures, and interview environments.

2. to study the ability of Indian children to comprehend standard English.

3. to investigate differences which may exist in the linguistic systems of Indian languages and dialects when compared with those of standard English.

Meanwhile, implications for teachers of Indian children are that more school time should be provided for children to interact with language, reading books should be withheld until language proficiency develops, and the instructional program should combine language experience and children's literature approaches.

First, children must hear from many different models the language they will later learn to read. Children hear language when listening to stories, when attending audio-visual presentations, when watching story dramatizations, and when listening to classroom visitors.

Next, children must use language for expression and for thinking. They use and hear each other use language for expression whey they talk about what they do, hear, see, feel, or think. They use language for thinking when they respons to what if or I wonder why questions. Language usage is promoted in a classroom where there are many things to manipulate, explore, build, take apart, or examine, and where there are opportunities for playing, talking, singing, and body movement.

Then children should produce language for reading. They produce written language when someone writes down words they have said. The words the children say become the captions under pictures, the labels for things they make, and charts of books they will read.

Finally, children read each other's productions because the words are are their words. The written language produced by children is real and meaningful to children.

After many experiences and much practice with language, children discover that many of their words and structural patterns are in other books. Then they are ready to start learning to read the language that other people have produced for them to read. For Indian children this may be second grade, or later.

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